

Committee on Accelerating Innovation

Charge: Develop recommendations to increase sustainable innovation leading to improved student achievement in the South Carolina public school system.

“Incremental improvements made while everyone else is getting better are not taking us where we want to be in this state. We are still doing way too many things that don’t work for way too many kids.”

–Jim Rex

The Committee on Accelerating Innovation agreed strongly with Dr. Rex’s conviction that school innovation is critical if South Carolina is to move beyond the incremental gains of recent years toward dramatic and sustainable improvement in student achievement.

The Committee also felt strongly that to be successful, South Carolina must focus not on developing a “laundry list of possible innovations” but on creating a statewide culture of innovation – a permanent new system that fosters and supports educational innovations proven to work. The Committee wrote, “We encourage Dr. Rex to do everything in his power to create enduring systems that 1) jump-start sustainable innovation; 2) identify and recognize the most effective and sustainable innovations; 3) disseminate information on those innovations that work; and 4) support the replication of sustainable innovation with resources.”

Ten principles guided the Committee’s recommendations:

Innovation must be focused on student achievement. While innovations in school support areas such as transportation and food service should be encouraged, the state should emphasize innovations in the core business of student achievement.

Innovation must be sustainable. Schools and districts must take responsibility both for implementing specific innovations that work for them, and for creating the infrastructure to support innovations beyond the implementation stage.

Innovation must be research-based and relevant to school needs. Rather than continuing its pattern of adopting short-term, untried innovations, South Carolina should emphasize sustained innovation that springs from research and is relevant to the needs of specific school settings.

Innovation requires outstanding leadership. South Carolina must address the shortage of leaders with the skills and training to design, plan, and implement innovative ideas by developing a strong pool of talented teachers, administrators, and school board leaders.

Innovation must be disseminated. Innovative education programs exist in South Carolina, but in isolation and without a mechanism for identification, recognition, and

replication. South Carolina must develop a system of network supports that matches innovative approaches to local needs.

Innovation must be supported. South Carolina needs structures and systems to encourage, recognize, disseminate, and implement school innovations.

Innovation must be collaborative, with many partners working together toward a common goal.

Innovation must be funded, requiring a revised system of educational funding.

Innovation requires new organizational structures focused on fostering new approaches to education.

Innovation is not optional, because educating children to a high standard can no longer be optional.

Recommendations

The Committee on Accelerating Innovation agreed on seven recommendations addressing system-wide changes needed to support a culture of innovation and six recommendations outlining specific innovations with significant potential to improve student achievement.

Systemic Recommendations

1. To embolden South Carolina schools, to outline the direction innovation will take, and to develop the language to communicate the importance of innovation, Dr. Rex, in collaboration with diverse partners, should develop and communicate regularly a compelling vision of the ideal state of twenty-first century education in South Carolina.
2. Dr. Rex should make the State Department of Education (SDE) a model of sustainable innovation in South Carolina by reorganizing the agency around a culture of sustainable innovation. Reorganization should emphasize the following:
 - a) a shift in the SDE's mission from oversight and regulation to support, facilitation, assistance, and promotion;
 - b) realignment of responsibilities to enable SDE staff to work as facilitators and consultants at the school and district level;
 - c) an emphasis on leadership development for continuous improvement; and
 - d) assessment of SDE functions unrelated to student achievement to determine the costs and benefits of keeping versus divesting or sub-contracting such functions.
3. The regulatory policies of the SDE should be reviewed and revised to eliminate those that inhibit and strengthen those that enhance flexibility and sustainable innovation. Dr. Rex should take the steps necessary, unilaterally or in concert with the State Board of

Education and the General Assembly, to deregulate public education to the extent possible.

4. Dr. Rex should create and fund a Center for Sustainable Innovation within the SDE to identify and promote effective and sustainable innovations, help match innovations to local needs, and provide specialized consulting expertise in a variety of innovative educational approaches.
5. Dr. Rex should create The South Carolina Public Education Trust as an external 501(c)(3) resource organization to provide advice on and generate funding for innovative initiatives and to serve as an advocate for public education.
6. Dr. Rex should work to remove dedicated funding requirements that stifle innovation and should encourage more flexible and equitable funding and resource allocation.
7. Dr. Rex should develop collaborative systems that promote community involvement in education.

Strategic Focus Recommendations

8. The SDE should create a continuum of service programs for parents, including adult literacy programs, in coordination with the technical college system, faith-based communities, and other education stakeholders. Parent involvement should be redefined to focus not on how often parents come to school, but on the skills parents use to help students achieve and on developing parenting skills that improve student achievement.
9. The SDE should promote redesigned flexible teaching environments focused on student learning, including:
 - a) teaching teams, in which a group of teachers work with specific student cohorts over a period of years;
 - b) increased emphasis on student engagement in active learning, creative and innovative thinking, and critical thinking;
 - c) elimination of “seat time” requirements in favor of individual progress as students are ready;
 - d) integration of learning from elementary to middle to high school, and on to postsecondary education; and
 - e) blurring of boundaries between schools.
10. South Carolina should provide incentives to promote effective teaching, including:
 - a) incentives for good teachers to stay in education;
 - b) incentives for strong teachers to work in under-performing schools;
 - c) professional development opportunities relevant to individual teacher, counselor, and staff needs;

- d) re-examination of the system for encouraging qualified individuals without specific licensure to teach, especially in teams; and
 - e) support for teacher “boot camps” and mentoring as intensive learning environments for experienced teachers who want to be reinvigorated.
11. South Carolina should upgrade and redesign superintendent and principal leadership training to focus specifically on supporting a culture of sustainable innovation. The state also should develop an alternate principal certification process for innovative state leaders with strong business expertise and a community background in education.
12. To identify sustainable improvements in use of technology for student learning, Dr. Rex should create a Technology Innovation Team in partnership with technology companies, foundations, teachers, students, and others with technology expertise.

South Carolina should create district-to-district, school-to-school, and classroom-to-classroom sustainable innovation design teams to facilitate development and implementation of education innovations.